

Communication Failure

Senate's Foreign Relations Committee And Rusk Come Close to Severing Ties

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WASHINGTON, Feb. 18—If formal courtesies are a hallmark of diplomacy, then the Secretary of State and the Senate Foreign Relations Committee have come close to breaking diplomatic relations in recent weeks.

Two recent acts of impoliteness underscore the increasingly strained relations between Secretary of State Dean Rusk and a majority of the most prestigious committee of the Senate.

News Analysis

The committee has snubbed the Secretary by not inviting him to give the customary annual survey of the world situation. Traditionally, he has given the committee such a survey in the opening days of every Congressional session. This session the committee, in bypassing him, has pointedly gone to the Central Intelligence director, Richard L. Helms, for its foreign policy briefing.

Mr. Rusk has insulted the committee—and in particular its chairman, Senator J. W. Fulbright of Arkansas—by suggesting in a brusque letter that the committee may be performing a disservice to the nation by hinting at questions about whether tactical nuclear weapons would be deployed in South Vietnam.

Atmosphere Is Distrusted

After perusing Mr. Rusk's letter last week, Senator George D. Aiken, of Vermont, shook his head in dismay and said, "It's getting so a guy can't express his thoughts around here anymore without someone taking him too seriously."

This epigrammatic observation sums up the distrustful atmosphere that has gradually built up between the Secretary and the Senators. While formal relations are maintained through such intermediaries as William B. Macomber Jr., Assistant Secretary of State for Congressional Affairs, communications have broken down between Mr. Rusk and the Senate committee, which has the primary responsibility for advising the executive branch on foreign policy.

The Vietnam war undoubtedly has contributed materially to the breakdown. The committee is a hotbed of Vietnam critics. In its current use of Lincolnian parallels, the Administration has a tendency to compare the Foreign Relations Committee in its critical ways with the Committee on the Conduct of the War that bedeviled President Lincoln.

But the criticism of the Vietnam war is only symptomatic of a deeper division that has developed between the Secretary and the committee.

Partly in reaction to the course of the Administration's policy, the committee for the last year or so has attempted to reassert the Senate's "advise and consent" role under the Constitution.

Much of the committee's effort, for example, to force Mr. Rusk to testify in public on Vietnam policy has been justified by the committee on the ground that it would help restore the constitutional balance between the executive branch

and Congress in the discussion and formulation of foreign policy.

And when Mr. Rusk, at White House direction, declined to testify in public, the committee, at the suggestion of Senator Albert Gore of Tennessee, retaliated by holding up an invitation for Mr. Rusk to testify in private.

What is still not fully appreciated in Mr. Rusk's balliwick on the seventh floor of the State Department is that this reassertion of Senate prerogatives is not limited to the Vietnam critics on the committee but has spread to such supporters of Administration policy as Senator Karl E. Mundt, Republican of South Dakota.

Over the last year, the committee has altered its manner of dealing with the State Department. It used to accept more or less at face value the policy briefings and statements received from the department. But lately, the committee has assumed the role of interrogator or advocate and has begun to raise searching questions about the policy information received.

This skeptical attitude was reflected in the committee's action a few weeks ago after Mr. Rusk had given a two-hour briefing on the Pueblo incident.

Not being content with the briefing, the committee sent a four-page letter to the Secretary raising further questions, ranging from the composition of the crew of the Pueblo to the question of whether the United States could undertake another war in Asia without being forced to use atomic weapons.

Officials Disconcerted

An implication of the letter seemed to be that the committee had not got the full, straight story about the Pueblo incident from Mr. Rusk's briefing.

To high State Department officials, this inquisitive and skeptical approach is disconcerting, if only because it upsets their long-standing concept of how to deal with Congress.

There is an irony to the present situation. The committee wants to be consulted but yet refuses out of political pique to talk with Mr. Rusk in private session.

Mr. Rusk keeps his office door open to individual committee members. But even such restrained members as Senator John Sherman Cooper of Kentucky come away from their private conversations with the feeling they have not got through to the Secretary.

There are signs that the strained political relations are about to take a negative personal turn. Committee members are complaining that Mr. Rusk must have known he was doing personal political damage to Senator Fulbright, who is up for re-election, in suggesting that the Senator had done a disservice to his country.